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SUBJECT: PROGRESS TOWARD A NEW AMERICAN EMBASSY IN OSLO

11. (U) Summary: Meetings with the city planning agency, local architects, and the public have put Oslo on a clear path toward receiving its first building permit. The redesigned chancery has won plaudits from city planners; their verbal approval and generally favorable comments from Oslo's Architectural Review Board have given us the green light to proceed with the formal process of requesting a frame permit. While our prospective neighbors have not embraced the new embassy with open enthusiasm, many are willing to dialogue on issues of mutual concern. End Summary.

12. (U) Post participated in a round of largely successful meetings this month that significantly advanced our eight-year-long quest for a new embassy. The first set of meetings took place with the Oslo Planning and Building Authority (OPBA) on January 7-8. For the first time since OBO and post began meeting with the OPBA in 2005, we received verbal approval for the design of the new chancery. This marked a complete turn-around from the OPBA's former position, once shared injudiciously with the media, that the chancery design was too industrial in appearance.

13. (SBU) A second meeting took place on January 19 with Oslo's Architectural Review Board, an advisory body that ensures that all new construction meets prevailing architectural standards. OPBA reported afterward that the Board had made recommendations concerning the stream bisecting our property and on some of the building materials we were planning to use. Neither, said OPBA, would pose any obstacle to its processing of our first building permit.

14. (U) As a courtesy, we scheduled an informational meeting with our prospective neighbors on the evening of January 19. Some 200 mostly elderly residents of the Huseby area crowded into a meeting hall to listen to briefings by our architects, OBO, OPBA, and the Ministry of Defense, which is responsible for several improvements, including a new athletic field and pedestrian bridge. As expected, residents asked about lighting, security guards, traffic, and parking. A few wanted us to start over with a higher building on a smaller plot of land, but we explained that the city's approved building plan did not allow us to build higher than three stories. Privately, some residents discreetly expressed admiration for the new chancery design.

15. (U) Public Affairs sent out a press release with OBO-provided images of the new embassy for inclusion in press reports. Media reaction has varied. A few stories carried only the residents' point of view, while other media commented on the "softer" embassy redesign that was more sensitive to the surrounding environment. For example, on January 20, the Oslo paper Aften (circulation 125,000) included a two-page spread featuring three large pictures and favorable comments about the new design from the head of the OPBA.

16. (SBU) Comment: OPBA's verbal approval of the embassy redesign represented a major breakthrough after five years of ongoing negotiations. The result is a unique structure incorporating the best of Norwegian and American design elements. Our local architects have begun the formal process of requesting our first building permit, which we are now confident of receiving within the next three months.

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